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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 001612

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV IS GOI INTERNAL

SUBJECT: WITHERED LIKUD: SHALOM DESPERATELY MANEUVERS TO
DISLODGE BIBI

Classified By: Political Counselor Norman Olsen for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) With the rest of the nation focused on the evolving makeup of the future governing coalition, the Likud faction's number two, Silvan Shalom, has started what will be at best a pained and drawn out process and at worst a doomed attempt to dislodge Likud Chairman Binyamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu is poised, as head of the largest party likely to remain outside the governing coalition, to lead the Knesset opposition. Likud's measly showing of 12 Knesset seats in the March 28 elections -- down from 38 in the 2003 elections -- has mired the party in an internal blame game, with former Foreign Minister Shalom seeking a Likud Central Committee vote to hold early party primaries in a bid to unseat Netanyahu.

2. (C) Likud MK Gilad Erdan, number four on Likud's Knesset list, and Netanyahu advisor Oren Helman told poloff in separate conversations April 25 that it is likely Shalom, long a power broker and patron within the Likud Central Committee, will manage to garner the 600 signatures of the Central Committee's membership of 2,900 necessary to call a Central Committee meeting to discuss the issue. They both predicted, however, that Netanyahu would not in any event agree to set a date for the Central Committee meeting, forcing Shalom to appeal the decision to Likud's internal court. Both said that the court is likely to find that it is unreasonable for the party to hold primaries so far in advance of the next scheduled elections, some four years off. They agreed that even if the court agrees to allow the Central Committee to meet, if the matter comes to a vote, the Central Committee is also likely to find it unreasonable to call primaries now. Erdan and Helman said that if the Central Committee does address the matter at all, it is possible that it would agree on a compromise between the Netanyahu and Shalom camps and set party primaries for next year. Helman and Erdan questioned the wisdom of Shalom's initiative, since both cited internal Likud polls that show that Shalom currently could not successfully challenge Netanyahu. Helman claimed that Netanyahu won 50 percent support in one poll, with Shalom garnering only some 20 percent. If Erdan and Helman are correct in their view of primaries next year, Netanyahu would have that year to rebuild a badly weakened and indebted Likud.

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